

A Sheep's Eye View sermon series
#3 – Through Death Valley
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Technically, we are halfway through Psalm 23. So far, we've looked at three of the six verses, and this morning, we make our way into the second half of these famous words, looking at them through the eyes of a sheep.

A very important shift has taken place here. Up to this point in the psalm, life has been good for the sheep. He's talked about what a great shepherd he has and how that shepherd has supplied all his needs. He's talked about how the shepherd helps him find green pastures for food and clean water for drinking. He's said that his shepherd restores his failing health and guides him down good paths.

But notice the pronoun shift starting with verse 4. It's no longer third person (he restores my soul); it's now second person (for you are with me). The sheep is no longer boasting across the fence to other sheep; he's now talking directly to his shepherd.

That shift makes sense when you consider the simultaneous shift in tone. Life has taken a downward turn; the green pastures have turned into dark valleys. And yet, even when the light is blotted out by shadows, the shepherd is still there, comforting the sheep.

It's amazing how the author of this psalm, King David, used his experience growing up as a shepherd to write these words and tease out the metaphor of God as a shepherd. For example, understanding the shepherd's yearly routines helps explain these verses.

Winter was always spent on the safety of the sheep ranch, but as soon the weather started to warm up, the shepherd would begin to lead his flock of sheep up the mountain, following the receding snow to find the greenest grass. As summer wore on, the shepherd would lead his flock further and further up the mountain to the most remote meadows. Then during fall, when the snow started falling on the highest parts of the mountains, the shepherd would begin to lead his sheep back down, ending up back on the sheep ranch just as winter set in. Then, next spring, the shepherd would start the journey all over again.

During the months away from the ranch, the sheep were completely alone with the shepherd, and their well-being was totally in the shepherd's hands. The sheep trusted the shepherd to lead them up safe paths and to fresh food and water. No matter where they went, they trusted that the shepherd would go with them.

Here's the thing about leading sheep up a mountain: you can't go straight up. It's hard to find boots to fit them. The shepherd would have to take the gentlest grade to get higher up the mountain, which often meant going through valleys. Valleys would also be where the best grass and water would be found so that the sheep could be nourished.

But valleys also presented serious dangers to the sheep. It was where predators like wolves would lurk, waiting for a flock to pass into the valley like a woolly dessert cart. Valleys also made the sheep susceptible to sudden and intense storms, rockslides, and avalanches. Valleys were not always safe places to be, but the shepherd knew that the only way to get up the mountain was to go through the valleys.

We can all probably relate to that. I believe within each of us is an idealistic desire to have constant mountaintop experiences with God, when we are able to bask in

God's presence and savor God's love free from any dangers. But realistically we each know that those mountaintop experiences are few and far between, and the only way to get to them is by going through valleys.

In my counseling class in seminary, we talked about something related to valleys called the "new normal." Life goes along hunky-dory until all of a sudden – bam! – we are hit with a crisis that throws our whole life out of whack – an illness, a death, a job loss, a move. Once we get our bearings, what we try to do is to return our life to the normal we had before. But the crisis has fundamentally altered things. Life can never go back to the normal we once knew. What we can do is to try and establish a new normal, created in light of how our life has changed. I have heard many, many people tell me that it was in the midst of the crisis that they experienced God, and that God walked with them out of that crisis and into their new normal.

Notice what the NIV version of the psalm says: Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death. It doesn't say even though I walk into the valley or get mired in the valley. It says through the valley. The implication here is that if God is with us, there are no dead-end streets. We may not be able to see the other side of the valley, but if God has walked with us into it, God will walk with us out of it.

But that's not always much consolation. We don't like valleys, do we? There are shadows there, shadows that remind us of death. We'll pray and plead to avoid the valleys, and kick and scream as we go into them. Why? Maybe we're afraid that things will never be normal again, and the truth is they very well might not be. But in the valley is where we can find unexpected refreshment, and often times where we learn the skills we will need to serve God in the future.

I officiated a wedding a few years ago, and at the reception I was talking with a couple who were there without their daughter, Megan. When I asked why Megan couldn't attend, the mom tearfully said that Megan had just been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. And I said to myself, "OK, God, I get it. Here's my new normal." I ended up talking with Megan's parents for an hour about my experience with MS.

The valleys in our lives are not dead ends. God can use even the most painful experience to bring God glory. It is the person who has lost someone who is best able to comfort someone in their grief. The person who can best minister to a broken heart is one who knows how it feels. The best person to walk with someone through a valley is the person who's been in that valley themselves, and can attest that God was there with them.

Because God is there, in our valleys, we need not fear, and the sheep names two pieces of equipment that provide comfort. When shepherds were making their yearly trek up and down the mountain, they couldn't afford to carry a lot of equipment with them. There were shepherd shacks along the route with basic necessities, so the shepherd only needed what he could carry for long distances. That often meant just a rod and a staff.

The rod was the main source of defense. From an early age, shepherds would practice using this weapon until it became a natural extension of them. They could hurl a rod hundreds of feet with great accuracy, striking a coyote who was about to swipe a sheep or a sheep who was about to walk into danger. The rod was a weapon of power and authority.

The rod was also used to keep the sheep healthy. The shepherd would use the rod to pull back the sheep's wool and inspect its skin for diseases. In the same way, God searches us, looking for the places we might need healing. And the rod could also be used

to discipline a sheep if they went astray. It was the shepherd's way of telling the sheep "No".

All of these uses of the rod correspond to the role of God's word in our lives. If we take the Bible seriously and spend time getting to know what it says, it can play all these parts for us. Through it God can protect us, search us, discipline us, and keep us healthy. If we let the shepherd do his job in our lives, we have nothing to fear, even when walking through the dark valleys of life.

In contrast to the rod, the staff had a different purpose. The staff is probably the most recognized tool of the shepherd. You don't see any modern depictions of shepherds without their trusty shepherd's crook. In the same way that a stethoscope identifies a doctor, the staff identifies a shepherd.

The staff had multiple uses. The crook end could be used to reach out and draw sheep away from dangerous situations. It could be used to fetch sheep that had fallen into water or gotten tangled in a bramble bush. It could be used to lift a lamb and return it to its mother.

The staff was also used to guide the sheep. The shepherd would gently use the straight end to guide the sheep by resting it against their side and nudging them in the right direction. The staff was also used as a way for the shepherd to let the sheep know he was there with them. Many times shepherds would walk beside the sheep and rest the end of the staff against their side. It was a way of keeping in touch with the sheep, and knowing their shepherd was close at hand would bring them comfort.

As we move through the valley of Lent and closer to the death of Jesus, we are reminded by Psalm 23 that we don't walk this road alone. It is in this valley where we can find rest, nourishment, and the presence of our Good Shepherd. There is so much in this world that scares us, whether we want to admit it or not. How comforting it is to know that with the Good Shepherd at our side, we can walk through valleys and up mountains.